



BUKNARI

One more place of religious conflict



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Buknari – One more place of religious conflict

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Introduction

The present document aims to provide a nuanced description of the dynamics and context of religious conflict in the village Buknari (Chokhatauri Municipality), analyze the causes of such conflicts in our political system, and share recommendations with relevant authorities.

The assessments presented in the document are based on our observation of the events of January 14 and 15 in the village Buknar and our recorded interviews with representatives of the Muslim and Christian communities. The research team planned additional field trips to the village of Buknari in early March and late June this year. The team sought to explore post-conflict experiences, attitudes, and existing realities with the local Christian and Muslim communities.

Village Buknari – Description of General Social Context

The village of Buknari is 12 km away from the Chokhatauri municipal center. According to the 2014 census, there are 775 inhabitants in the village. Locals state that the village has a population of 500, where the ratio of Muslim to Christian community is almost equal. The main livelihood of the residents is related to agriculture and animal husbandry. Part of them has to go abroad for work, mostly to Turkey. Muslim community first settled in Buknari 70-50 years ago. Majority of the Muslim community resettled from the nearby village, Zoti. The key reasons for their resettlement were large families and a shortage of land resources in their village. Muslim and Christian communities are mixed in the village and their geographical location is not sharply separated or segregated. However, the Christian community mentions various districts of the village as “Adjarians side”.

The Christian and Muslim population of the village notes that there were conspicuous practices of coexistence and sharing in the village before the conflict. Indeed, the population cannot recall the examples of mixed families, however, they remark that before the conflict there were frequent cases of collective celebration of holidays and feasts. Furthermore, village residents also talk about social support practices, which broke religious lines and created a sense of commonness.¹ Muslim and Christian communities state that several years ago when construction of the church commenced, a significant part of the Muslim community physically and materially assisted the Christian parish in construction work, during Ramadan.

At one sight, there are no sharp differences between the economic and material conditions of Muslim and Christian communities. However, both groups consider one another as more privileged, or financially strong. According to the Muslim population’s feelings, Christians have larger lands and more opportunities, while Christians think that the Muslim community is stronger economically, due to their work ethic and practice.

Although Christians and Muslims assert that they lived together in the village with mutual respect and peace before the conflict, some local Muslims recall that even before the conflict, “the prestige of Christians in the village was greater than that of Muslims.” The Christian community also indirectly

¹ Material prepared by Batumelebi, 07.01.2021, available at:
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=31412243338423>

discusses the feelings of alienation. One Christian woman notes that Muslims in our village do not mourn their dead and do not want to arrange a cemetery in the village.

According to one local Muslim, both previous friendships and coexistence were built on acknowledging the superiority of Christians and the silence of Muslims. "If I was not your enemy before, why am I your enemy now?" He asks, claiming that he helped to build a village church and that Christians, at least should not interfere if they do not help the Muslims to build their place of worship.

In our conversations, members of the Muslim community express concern that they are almost not represented at the local government level. "Even a cleaning personnel is not a Muslim in Chokhatauri City Hall," said one Muslim woman. The general political context and the experience of conflicts with a religious context in other regions and the protracted process of the construction of a new mosque in Batumi also influence the attitude of Muslims.

The need for place of worship and attempt to organize

The public debate on the construction of a mosque in the village Buknari began in 2012. According to the Muslim community, although there are mosques in the nearby villages of Buknar (Zoti, Nasakirali), it would be more convenient for them to organize a Jami (shrine) in their village, given the road and additional financial costs. As community members explained, they addressed the Chokhatauri municipality to clarify this issue and also listened to the opinion of the local Orthodox community. The orthodox community opposed the mosque construction idea straightaway arguing that Buknari was a "Christian Land" and it was not permitted to organize an Islamic worship place there. Local self-government authority did not take the concrete decision on the construction issue at that time and left the Muslim community without an official response. For this reason, Muslims at that time refused to construct a mosque and continued praying individually at their houses.

Since the performance of Friday Jumu'ah prayer is an important aspect of the Islamic faith and practice, and at the same time, local Muslims did not want to go against the wishes of their Orthodox neighbors, in 2020 the Muslim community decided to raise money and to purchase a house far from the village center. As they explain, to avoid the annoyance of neighbors they do not plan to construct a minaret or install sound amplifiers for the azan (prayer call) on the building. To this end, about 10 months ago, they bought a private house from a Muslim neighbor who moved to Tsalka on the outskirts of a village where no neighboring house exists and arranged a place of worship. For 7 months before the conflict, Muslims regularly gathered in this space for Friday prayers. Muslims clarify that although they had not said anything about the house and their practice of praying to their orthodox neighbors, their collective prayers should have been noticeable for them. Muslims categorically deny the widespread belief that they bought the house with the support of Turkey. The elder in charge of this process shared in detail the process started by the Muslim families of this village in order to raise money and organize the Jami.

Interviews with members of the Christian community show that they try to justify their dissatisfaction by arguing that their neighbors did not say anything about the shrine's opening, and, at some point, other [Muslim] believers from neighboring villages began to commute there for Friday prayers. In their words, Muslims had the constitutional right to engage in prayers, but they also had to follow the logic

of neighborly relations. In their narratives, they try to overshadow the motives of intolerance and non-recognition, which can be understood as a setback and also a reflection, in a way.

Conflict escalation and violent experiences

Talking to the locals, it is clarified that relations between the village residents got strained in December 2020, after information was spread on social networks that a Muslim community was planning to build a mosque in the village. Although the Muslim community denied the allegations and explained to the local Orthodox community that they only wanted to perform the Friday prayers collectively, this acknowledgment and promise did not resolve tensions between the neighbors.

The local population clarifies, that the situation got so tense on religious grounds that there have been several facts of verbal and physical abuse between the Muslim and Orthodox community members. Namely, community members note that in January, one Orthodox woman met with the Muslims gathered for Friday prayers in the praying house and verbally abused them. The woman shouted that her community would not allow the construction of a mosque in Buknar and threw stones in the direction of Muslim neighbors. The incident was witnessed by police officers mobilized near the shrine, who pulled the woman out of the place, and only then the Muslims got the opportunity to pray.

Following the incident, another case of violence was reported in the village on January 10, 2021. According to Muslim respondents, one of their orthodox neighbors started coming to Muslim homes and arguing with them in insulting language that it would be impossible to open a mosque in a Christian village. It was during a similar incident that one of the Muslims gave a physical response to verbal abuse and shaking hands of his neighbor. The incident is described differently by the Orthodox we interviewed. According to them, one of the Muslims in the village complained that a neighboring orthodox man did not greet him on the street and physically assaulted him.

The incident that took place on January 10, 2021, became known to the police, who launched an investigation on the same day and questioned the opposing persons at the police station. The forensic medical examination was also appointed in connection with the injuries. Police officers warned the opposing persons to refrain from the conflict and called for reconciliation. However, the situation soon escalated again on January 12, and it took the form of even more severe violence.

The incident on January 12, which was the culmination of the conflict dynamics, is described differently by members of the Muslim and Orthodox communities we interviewed. According to the Muslims, on January 12, there was another verbal confrontation between two members of the Muslim and Orthodox communities, due to which the family members and relatives of the Muslim community went to the Orthodox neighbors gathered in the center of the village to clarify the situation. Upon arrival, one of the Orthodox cursed them, which soon escalated into a physical confrontation. During the physical confrontation, the Orthodox G.S. stoned two Muslims in the head, including a minor on the spot. Both individuals received severe head injuries and their hospitalization became necessary.

The dynamics of the violence that took place on January 12 are described differently by Orthodox respondents. They said that on January 12, a provocative act was carried out by one person from the Muslim community, after which other Muslims came to the scene and physically assaulted the Orthodox on the spot. During the ousting of the opposing group, one of the Muslims physically touched

an orthodox woman on the spot, which irritated G.S. He picked up the stone and turned it several times, injuring two young men.

The Muslim and Orthodox population of the village also notes², that one crew of police was present at the scene during the incident, who also tried to pull apart the opposing parties and were able to calm down the situation on time. Around the incident, an investigation has been launched into the crime under Article 126 of the Criminal Code of Georgia (violence) and G.S., who was sentenced to imprisonment as a restraining measure, has been detained.³

It should be noted that the situation in Buknari got tense on January 13⁴, when Georgian Muslims from different regions (mainly from Adjara) arrived to show solidarity with the local Muslim community. Police officers did not allow them to enter the village and approach citizens gathered in the village center. However, groups of young people broke a police cordon and entered the village. This incident did not result in any kind of violence or verbal abuse between the communities. However, the involvement of outsiders in the process has led to growing dissatisfaction and fears among local Orthodox Christians. The Orthodox community recalls that the cordon breach intensified security concerns for them. Police gave them strict instructions to return to their homes immediately. They perceived this fact as an attack. In conversations with us, the local Orthodox community describes this episode as hypertrophied and uses negative stereotypes of the threat attributed to Muslims.

Conversation with the population reveals that the concerns and positions of the parties to the conflict are built on their fears and dignity. The Christian population says it will not allow the construction of mosques on Georgian soil. From their point of view, this is an attempt to protect the history and dignity of Georgia. At the same time, they emphasize that after the conflict, on January 13, when other Muslims appeared to support local Muslims, they felt particularly afraid.

Local Muslims, on the other hand, declare that they saw the real face of their neighboring Christians when they attempted to kill a minor child and threw stones at the child and another person. Muslim women have openly expressed concern for the physical and emotional safety of their children. At the same time, the Muslim population says that they are tired of asserting their Georgianness. They are full-fledged Georgians, citizens of Georgia, and their religious affiliation should not be a reason for anyone to question their Georgianness. According to the community, prayer is a fundamental human right and should not be violated.

²Live from Buknari, from 6:18, EMC representatives on Guria News, 13.01.2021 available at: <https://www.facebook.com/gurianews/videos/412653606638878/>

³ police detained one person in connection with the incident in Chokhatauri Municipality", website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 12.01.2021, available at: <https://police.ge/ge/guriis-politsiam-chokhatauris-munitsipalitetsi-momkhdar-intsidenttan-dakavshirebit-1-piri-daakava/14274>

⁴ Confrontation in Guria - the police is mobilized in the village of Buknari", Formula TV, 13.01.2021. available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJjaqqIM1sQ>

Police role and actions in the chain of violent incidents

According to Muslim respondents, the Ministry of Interior Affairs was actively responding to the conflict incidents between the Muslim and Orthodox communities in December and January in the village Buknari. In particular, the investigation was commenced on both cases of physical violence on January 10 and 12, 2021 and in one case the alleged perpetrator was arrested.

Beyond the proactive response from police officers, community members note that as early as December, when local authorities became aware of a possible conflict, patrol police officers began active patrolling of the village. One or two police crews moved around the village several times a day, while members of the Muslim community noted that on Friday, one crew of patrol police stood in the village center and the other near the shrine.

As locals remark, one police crew was also present in the center of the village at the time of the incident on January 12, 2021, and as the conflict escalated, about 10-15 police officers mobilized on the spot. Locals explained that although police officers were unable to prevent a physical confrontation, they were soon able to separate the opposing parties and defuse the situation.

The participation of the Ministry of Interior Affairs was later seen in the negotiation process. On January 13, the staff of the Guria Police and the Adjara A/R Police Department held a meeting with the local population and in the following days, they had active communication with the local population. A special mobilization of police officers was observed on January 15, when a meeting between Orthodox and Muslim communities was held in Buknari with the participation of high-ranking officials. At the outset of the meeting, the police officers blocked the main road to the village center (where the meeting was taking place) with two cordons, Muslim and Christian communities were separated from each other and only certain individuals and media organizations were given the opportunity to attend the meeting.

Alleged participation of school teachers in the conflict

According to the data of the Ministry of Education of Georgia, 119 students study in the public school of the village Buknari.⁵ Both Muslim and Christian students attend the school. According to locals, there is only one Muslim teacher in the school.

The Muslim community negatively assesses the role of school teachers in escalating the conflict. Muslims say that there were no facts of open indoctrination or deliberate proselytism in the school before the conflict. Nonetheless, they said, certain discriminatory attitudes towards the recognition of Muslim students' successes were still observed by some teachers in previous years. However, due to the recent events, part of the Muslim families have also thought about not sending their children to school in Buknar. Such attitude towards the school was provoked by the insulting posts on Muslims on social networks, which, according to the locals, were spread and/or supported by the teachers of Buknar Public School. The main content of these Facebook posts was the summons to protect the "Christian village" from Tatars/Tatarisation. Muslims believe that these demands appeared on social networks, arose after the opening of a shrine in the village. The term "Tatar" used in their direction was taken by

⁵ Information provided by Ministry of Education, Science, Sport and Culture, available at: http://catalog.edu.ge/index.php?module=school_info&page=detals&school_code=3796

Muslims as an insult and they also could not understand why the village needed to be protected from them. They could not receive an adequate response to these appeals from the teachers or the school principal. In a conversation with us, local Muslims stated that they did not know whether the respective guidance was given to those teachers who were involved in spreading hate speech.

After the reconciliation reached on January 15, the Muslim community no longer expressed an interest in discussing and responding to the issue, nor did it share evidence of problematic content shared by the teachers, that would allow us to analyze their content in detail.

Conflict mediation process

Information about the events in the village Buknari became known to the public on January 13, 2020. However, for almost a month before that, the negotiation process between the neighboring communities had already started with the participation of the local authorities. According to Chokhatauri Municipality Mayor Irakli Kuchava, the municipality held 7 meetings with the opposing parties before the January 12 incident.⁶ According to the Muslim community, and as it turned out later, the negotiations organized by the municipality were not properly effective. During the negotiations at this stage, one of the proposals of the local government was to transfer the shrine space acquired by the Muslims to the elected leaders of the Muslim and Christian communities in common ownership, which was not acceptable to the Muslim community.⁷

After the aggravation of the situation, Guria Governor Zurab Nasaraia and Chokhatauri Mayor Irakli Kuchava arrived in Buknari on January 13 to hold talks.⁸ Eventually, however, this negotiation also ended without results. Muslims interviewed by us at the Chokhatauri City Hall on January 14 declared that their real representatives were not present at the January 13 meeting and that the meeting could not guarantee security and peace in the village because neither the representatives of the conflict parties nor high-ranking state officials attended the meeting. At the same time, the language of the people gathered at the City Hall showed even deeper worries and frustrations and the need for a radical change of policy by the state.

On January 14, for some reason, only the representatives of the Ministry of Interior Affairs spoke the protesters gathered at the Chokhatauri City Hall all day long, and despite the demand of the gathered people, the political actors did not meet them until the evening. Only later and after strong criticism, the Mufti of Western Georgia arrived in Chokhatauri and promised to solve the problem.⁹ Despite this, the gathered people continued to protest. The same evening, Vasil Chigogidze (majoritarian in Guria) arrived on the spot and promised to organize a participatory reconciliation meeting next Friday.

⁶ Media: Three Locals Injured in Chokhatauri, Civil.ge. 13.01.2021. available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/390996>

⁷ The result of discriminatory and non-secular state policy - NGOs on Buknari", Mtavari Channel, 13.01.2021. available at: <https://mtavari.tv/news/28896-sakhelmcipos-diskriminatsiuli-arasekularuli>

⁸ "What is happening in Chokhatauri – confrontation on religious grounds, journal Batumelebi, 13.01.2021, available at <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/322770/>

⁹ "The Mufti of All Georgia Arrived in Chokhatauri to Meet with Muslims", Batumelebi 14.01.2021. available: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/322880/>

The meeting took place in the village Buknari on Friday, January 15, after the Friday Juma prayers. Before the talks, there was excessive police mobilization in the village and separating cordons and high levels of security measures, which rather had an isolating impact on the people there.

Members of the Georgian Parliament: Vasil Chigogidze (Guria Majoritarian) and Nino Tsilosani, representatives of the Georgian Patriarchate and the Muslim Administration, other Muslim leaders, and 10 representatives (each) from local religious communities took part in the negotiation process organized at the Buknari Cultural Center.¹⁰ After an emotional sharing of the experience of coexistence, the parties agreed that the conflict was over and the neighbors would continue to coexist peacefully.¹¹

In parallel with the ongoing events, high-ranking state political officials, including the President of Georgia, the Prime Minister of Georgia made public statements calling on the parties to remain calm and emphasizing the value of religious freedom and equality in Georgia.¹²

The post-conflict situation in Buknari

After the conflict, we paid two more extended visits to the village of Buknari in early March and late June. During the meetings, we talked to the local Christian and Muslim community; We studied the situation in the village in the post-reconciliation period, inter-community relations, and attitudes.

Even in the post-conflict period, several negative experiences were revealed in the village, damaging inter-community peaceful coexistence.

On March 2, 2021, another case of physical violence was reported in Buknari when a local Christian, R. M., went to the house of one of the active Muslims. He demanded a meeting with the head of the family in the wake of swearing and insults. R.M. took out a knife and threatened to kill him. The attacker shouted that he wanted to seek revenge on "those who swore at Buknari." Neighboring women were able to defuse the situation and called the police. Police arrested R. M. After the incident, law enforcement intensified patrolling in the village. Against this background, the victim family stated that they and other Muslim neighbors felt unsafe in the village. Muslims worry that good neighborly relations between the communities have been damaged, and now they have to defend themselves through the police force, which is far from normal.

Muslims also recalled the negative experience of the village assembly held in their village in spring, notably when their Christian neighbors refused to be in the same hall with them when they were supposed to discuss the common needs of the village. The local authorities did not have the necessary knowledge or experience to manage or mediate such a situation.

¹⁰ "Buknar Christian and Muslim residents agree on 'peaceful coexistence'", Civil.ge. 15.01.2021. available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/391517>

¹¹ "The parties say they have reconciled and the religious confrontation in Guria has ended", "Netgazeti", available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/512283/>

¹² The political leaders of the country talk about the importance of religious tolerance", Civil.ge. 14.01.2021. available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/391203>

The Muslim community is still critical of the situation in the rural public school. Muslim parents say they deliberately did not demand the dismissal of teachers involved in the conflict. They believed it would make the situation worse at school. However, during the school meeting, they understood that the teachers did not feel remorseful or make attempts to admit their mistakes. On the contrary, teachers claimed that Muslims brought along "terrorists" in the village and had them get involved in the process. It is noteworthy that this dissatisfaction of the Muslim community does not apply to all teachers in the school. They can even name teachers who held a neutral and peaceful position in the conflict then and now.

The particular dissatisfaction of local Muslims concerning the school issue was caused by the man's appointment on the position of the school minibuses driver, whose wife is considered one of the organizers of the conflict. According to them, the driver himself physically confronted the Muslims. The intolerance towards this person is so high that, in their words, the Muslim students themselves refused to commute by the said driver's vehicle and, instead, walked to the school in protest. The parents of the Muslim students gathered and demanded that the school administration fire the said driver, assign a professional resource officer at the school, and appoint their trusted persons to the school board. However, they said these requests were not adequately met by the school and the local resource center, and another driver was allocated for the Muslim students. A driver with a problematic background remained in his position; The role/function of a resource officer was delegated to a local teacher who is not equipped with the necessary knowledge to manage the school environment positively. In addition, no new and active members were added to the Board of Trustees. It is unacceptable for the Muslim community that Christian and Muslim children have to commute to school by separate minibuses, in segregation. In their view, this deepens the alienation between the children.

The Muslim community recalls a graduation ceremony for 12th graders. The teachers did not join their celebration and took ceremonial pictures with only one Christian student. The photos were later shared on social media.

We also met with local teachers. They feel ashamed that the village was portrayed negatively. They say Christians and Muslims in this village have been organically linked to each other in recent years and what happened is the fault of specific interested actors and politics. Nevertheless, the teachers' attempts to critically assess the current events and their sensitivity to equality were drastically weak.

The distrust of Muslim parents towards the school is compounded by the fact that there is only one Muslim teacher. While the majority of school children are Muslim. Some parents are even considering homeschooling their children or moving them to another school.

Locals worry that inter-community relations are still tricky. They do not greet each other and share common social spaces; They even refrain from going to each other's birthday parties. Locals think this could lead to a whole new confrontation.

The locals' views on conflict resolution

It is noteworthy that, despite the alienation and pain inflicted in the post-conflict period, the local Christian and Muslim communities express readiness for genuine reconciliation and building trust

between communities. Local Muslims think that this process should be conducted with the involvement of state and civil society organizations; This requires the involvement of external actors and resources. On the other hand, local Christians believe that this process will resolve itself and that the participation of outsiders is not necessary.

According to the Muslim community, it is essential that the conflict is resolved fairly and that the state understands the concerns of the Georgian Muslim community and sees them as equal citizens. They worry that they are underrepresented and less involved in politics, even at the local government level - they are not employed in the self-government administration, are not represented in the Sakrebulo (except for the majoritarian representative of the village of Zoti), or in the local ranks of the ruling political party. According to the Muslim community, the new generation has raised its voice and is not afraid to voice its critical civic positions. That is why the state must see the significant social changes that are taking place in the Georgian Muslim community. With this in mind, the principles of equality and religious neutrality must be strictly adhered to in the process of conflict transformation.

It is also interesting to note that perceptions of one another among local religious communities are based on particular hypertrophy and fictional ideas. This tendency is particularly evident among the Orthodox community, which seeks to geo-politicize issues and shares preconceived notions of the perceived threat believed to be posed by Muslims (mainly towards the Muslim youth from neighboring villages). The parties do not know each other's truth even concerning critical factual circumstances, and this experience somewhat complicates reconciliation. It is essential that the underlying issues of mutual understanding and reassessment of problematic, exaggerated perceptions among the conflict parties are covered in the process of conflict transformation.

The local Christian and Muslim communities have a history of coexistence spanning several years. Both Muslims and Orthodox recall shared positive experiences. As mentioned above, Muslims also contributed to the construction of the church in the village. In particular, during Ramadan, they worked alongside the builders. There are experiences of everyday celebrations and feasts on different holidays. In a peripheral rural environment, relationships between communities take on additional meanings. Social connections and support here are higher than in urban spaces, and the conflicts that have arisen in this fabric are leaving even more severe traumatic traces for the people. At the same time, such a field has more potential for conflict transformation and reconnection. The memory of coexistence, daily social connections, and shared spaces give them more opportunities to get closer. These resources and specifics must be adequately taken into account by the state in conflict transformation. The residents raised similar observations: *"Today I may not say hello to my neighbor, I have cried because of it;" "We are not the people who will not make concessions;" "We feel this pain because we are not alien to each other. We can not hate each other. We have been together for so long. We have a history together – fosterhood, groomship; veiled grandmothers have raised us;*

It is also interesting to note that, as local communities say, social networks are another reason contributing to alienation. What is not said among people in a real setting becomes easier to express in a virtual realm. In their view, to restore trust, it is essential to build honest dialogue and connections

between communities. And, in both communities, there is interest and emotional readiness for such a process to take place.

Local communities often talk about the interested external forces, though these positions are not substantiated. Several of them mentioned the promise of the government officials to build a mosque, which local representatives of opposition parties later voiced. Such a promise is denied by the leaders of the Muslim community who were involved in organizing Jammeh. The Orthodox community also indirectly speaks of Turkish interests when discussing external forces, however, this position is not specified, and the prevalence of all this is more likely the use of narrative.

Discussions with local communities show that the school has a special resource for conflict transformation. It is essential to restore the trust of the Muslim community in the school administration and create institutional guarantees for it. According to our observations, the school administration is not ready to develop programs based on equality, multiculturalism, and solidarity independently. Support is much needed in this regard.

The role of local government in the process of conflict transformation must also be seen. However, the local community's trust towards the local authorities, especially that of the Muslim community, is relatively low. In their words, despite the meetings organized over the span of several weeks, the local self-government could not prevent the conflict and lacked needed knowledge and sensitivity. According to the Muslim community, if the intervention of the center and actors with relevant experience in the current events in Buknar had taken place in time, the conflict could have been prevented.

Learning from local experiences and observing local peacebuilding practices is particularly important for transforming conflicts identified in the micro-social field. Often the locals know better what the models and experiences of peacebuilding work should be like, as they have to construct such experiences on daily basis.¹³ In the process of conflict resolution, it is essential to see locals not as objects who need to be trained and disciplined from the outsiders to become rational agents of peace but to see them as subjects who already have day-to-day experience of peace negotiation and reconciliation. That is why it is essential to listen to local community leaders in the peacebuilding process and establish their affiliation with the peace process.¹⁴ In addition, it is necessary to take into account local traditions, social and cultural norms. At the same time, the peacebuilding process mustn't disregard the asymmetry of social, economic, and political powers at the local level and the responsibilities and roles of various state and private actors in this process¹⁵.

¹³ Philippa Williams, *Everyday Peace? Politics, Citizenship and Muslim lives in India*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

¹⁴ Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Vesna and Mary Martin, "Wholly local? Ownership as Philosophy and Practice in Peacebuilding interventions", 2018

¹⁵ A Coomunitarina Peace Agenda for the South Caucasus: Supporting Everyday Peace practices, Vadim Romashov, Nuriyya Guliyeva, Tatia Kalatozishvili, Lana Kokaia, *Journal of Conflict Transformation*, Caucasus Edition Volume 3, Issue 1, 2018

Legal and Political Assessment of the process

We believe that initial steps taken towards the goal of de-escalating the conflict and reconciling were indeed important. However, we believe that it is essential for state agencies to study systemic legal, political, and social reasons of such religious repressions, persecution, conflicts, and alienation and respond with legislative and institutional, as well as with positive intervention in macro and micro social levels and reforms.

Religious harassment of the Georgian Muslim community in the village Buknari is not the first and single case. The chain of such religious conflicts was revealed in previous years in the villages of Tsikhisdziri (2013), the village of Nigvziani (2012), the village of Tsintskaro (2013), the village of Samtatskaro (2013), the village of Chela (2013), Kobuleti (2014), the village of Mokhe (2014) and the village of Adigeni (2016). It must be said that all these conflicts had common social and cultural causes and contexts. The conflict took place in communities populated by eco-migrant families in multi-religious-ethnic communities, where neighboring communities have a weak common memory and tradition of coexistence. Furthermore, the conflicts were linked to the context of the key transition of government, or elections, and were associated with differing perceptions of new political realities and promises from local communities. In all cases, the rhetoric of the local Christian community was based on the paradigm of ethnoreligious nationalism and was based on Islamophobic/sometimes Turkophobic sentiments of not allowing Islamic shrines or other religious institutions on Georgian soil. As the history of conflicts shows, this rhetoric is even more severely revealed in relation to the Georgian Muslim community, which is ethnically Georgian, and that is why their Islamic self-identity becomes doubly unacceptable to the framework of prevailing ethnoreligious nationalism.

Unfortunately, government agencies have not a proper political and legal response to these conflicts. In some cases, the situation has been eased by the complete disregard for the religious rights and needs of the Muslim community (for example, in Samtatskaro, Jami could not be opened in a private house purchased by a local community. Kobuleti Boarding house is closed until today, Mokhe historic mosque could not gain such status regardless of the special commission created for this purposes). There has been no effective legal response to almost any of the incidents, and no one has been held legally accountable for religious persecution and violence, including apparent cases of police brutality against local Muslim peasants (For the sake of accuracy in this regard, we should mention the decision, made after seven years since the beating of Muslims in Mokhe, in line with the intervention of the European Court, of the Prosecutor's Office to charge the two former police officers involved in the case¹⁶). Beyond the problem of responding to violations of human rights, in no case have government agencies studied the systemic causes of such conflicts and pursued long-term transformational policies that would create a solidary, equal, and multicultural social environment in conflict-affected communities.

¹⁶ The decision of the Prosecutor's Office in the Mokhi case is delayed and illusory, Social Justice Center, 2021, available: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/mokhis-sakmeze-prokuraturis-gadatsqvetileba-dagvianebuli-da-mochvenebitia>

It is essential that the state had a relatively active response to the religious harassment identified in Buknar. In contrast to previous experiences, supporting statements to freedom of religion and equality were made by senior state officials, mediation process although deficiently, but was still timely commenced and police also legally responded. However, given the problematic visions and sentiments within the dominant religious community, as well as the dominant ethnoreligious nationalism in our environment, we consider being fundamentally important that the state pursue long-term transformative politics in the Buknari community as well as in the communities with religious/ethnic conflict experiences.

The state must understand that ethnocentrism, chauvinism, Islamophobia is social constructs, it permeates all aspects of social life and ideologies based on it create risks for social cohesion. This ideology stands on "us" and "them" division and creates unjustified social hierarchies.¹⁷ Religious conflicts and the chain of conflicts revealed in our reality are the most severe manifestations of this division and hierarchy. All these conflicts had a social character and it was not organized by specific groups and individuals, but the (dominant) community collectively, which reveals the severity and systematicity of the problem.¹⁸ Such conflicts have a deep and cumulative social effect and affect non-dominant ethnic and religious groups and create a sense of alienation¹⁹, exclusion²⁰ and feeling of secondaryness²¹. Such practices substantially damage the integrity and stability of society. That is why it is essential to confront this problem with state structural changes and not just one-time political and repressive approaches.

In our view, working on conflict transformation should mean the study of systemic social and cultural causes of conflict in a particular community, and response to it should involve the implementation of an agreed and consistent positive intervention plan by the state in the field of education, culture, and social protection policy. Firstly, the working process must listen to the perspectives, life experiences, and grievances of victims of religious harassment and persecution and to well-understand the severe social and psychological traces that such experiences leave in minority communities. This work should also include a study of the material aspects of exclusion (lower access to services, resources, rights; fewer opportunities for development, social and economic exclusion, weak political participation, etc.) and changes planned in their response.

From our perspective, the above-mentioned conflict activities should include 1. Introduction of long-term multicultural programs and guidelines within the school, 2. Overcoming mistrust in the school space and establishing communication-based on building trust with parents and students; 3. Creation

¹⁷“Batumi Mosque Case”, EMC, 03.02.2020. available: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2284810785149655>

¹⁸ Visible and invisible borders of Adjara, researched prepared by EMC, 06.10.2020, available:

<https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/acharis-khiluli-da-ukhilavi-sazghvreb-i>, also:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=336469190988991>

¹⁹ Reflection of local activist from Adjara, Hurie Abashidze, 19.01.2021. available at:

<https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/gadamkartulda>

²⁰ Reflection of local activist from Adjara, Nestan Ananidze, 19.01.2021. available at:

<https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/vin-var>

²¹ Reflection of local activist from Tsalka, Zaza Mikeladze, 19.01.2021. available

at:<https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/tsartmeuli-kartveloba>

of infrastructure of cultural spaces in the rural area and introduction of multicultural content programs;

4. Planning the work of social workers with people with experience of discrimination and harassment.
5. Encouragement of community-based programs (including grant projects) for Muslim and Christian communities at the local government level;
6. Development of a secular and equality policy by local authorities based on addressing the concerns and needs of non-dominant religious groups and discussing them democratically with the community.

All of these tasks and activities as a whole must be planned in a democratic consultation with community leaders

In addition to positive, transformational work at the micro-social level, it is important to understand the shortcomings of state policy in the area of religious freedom and to initiate fundamental reforms.

The sharply ineffective role of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, an agency directly subordinated to the Prime Minister, and the dire consequences of its policies over the years in the context of this conflict should also be noted. Although the agency's competence is to facilitate the resolution of religious disputes, the agency had not been active in resolving the conflict in the village of Buknar and their involvement in the mediation process was not visible, which should be explained by the sharp criticism and distrust towards the agency. Moreover, the statements made by the head of the agency in the media²² once again show that he openly ignores the real challenges and needs of religious communities.

Besides, special attention should be paid to the criticism voiced by the Muslim community towards the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia during the ongoing negotiations on the conflict in the village Buknari, which directly derives from the policy based on the control of non-dominant religious organizations of the agency and more broadly of the government.²³

Over the years, religious organizations, human rights actors, including the Public Defender, point to several systemic challenges to the freedom of religion²⁴, that exist at the level of legislation, administrative policy, and institutional arrangements, as well as at the micro-social / community level. These challenges are related to discriminatory provisions in the legislation (for example, discriminatory provisions in the rule on the funding of religious organizations, the State Property Law, the Forest Code), years of neglect, and omission of the needs and rights of religious minorities (e.g. the absence of law and policy on the restitution of property confiscated during the Soviet Union, the problem of protection and preservation of historical heritage sites) non-secular and anti-equality content expressed in political language, discriminatory administrative practices (eg, obstacles to the construction of religious buildings, religious indoctrination, discrimination and proselytism in public schools), ineffective respond and prevention of crimes motivated by religious intolerance.

²² Media speech by the head of State Agency in Religious Affairs, available at: https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=4259701250712511&_rdr

²³ Elections in the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia <https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/archevnebi-sruliad-sakartvelos-muslimta-sammartveloshi>

²⁴ Freedom of Religion – Critics of state discriminatory and non-secular politics, EMC, 2017

Since the establishment of the State Agency in Religious Affairs in 2014, none of these important issues have been resolved. In the contrary, we have consistently seen sharply regressive and anti-human rights initiatives by the Agency.

In our observation, the process of change is substantially hampered by the problematic perspective of the government towards the field of religious freedom and its institutional arrangement, where the State Agency in Religious Affairs is considered as an exclusive actor of the government in this field. In the presence of this agency and its policies, a positive policy change in the field of freedom of religion and the necessary democratic communication with government agencies becomes impossible, because agency 1. has the problematic mandate and vague competences, which enables its arbitrariness and non-democratic/non-transparent work;²⁵ 2. has the policy visions largely based on security and hierarchies²⁶; 3. has more experience on working anti-human rights initiatives, rather than working in the benefit of human rights. 4. has low trust among religious and public organizations and human rights actors. 5. Ultimately, the agency is also ineffective, as it is invisible during the important conflicts and disputes related to religious freedom or further damages the process. It is noteworthy that international organizations have also expressed their sharp criticism towards this agency.

Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention on National Minorities indicates that in conversation, religious minorities expressed low trust towards the State Agency in Religious Affairs and at the same time showed higher trust towards the Religious Council existing at Public Defender's Office, which unites 33 religious organizations and creates a horizontal and independent framework for organizing.²⁷

According to the assessment of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), its recommendation to the Government of Georgia to strengthen communication between the State Agency for Religious Affairs and the Public Defender was not implemented and the Agency did not take any serious steps to cooperate with the Council. The Commission emphasizes that, instead of co-operation, tensions are observed between these two bodies and there is a clear misunderstanding between their positions on freedom of religion. This was revealed in the process of drafting constitutional amendments in 2017 when there was an initiative to restrict freedom of religion for national security purposes. The State Agency for Religious Affairs did not oppose the initiative, which was an important signal for religious groups and human rights organizations to consider the agency as a tool designed to control religious organizations.²⁸

According to the **Oslo Coalition** for Freedom of Belief and Religion, an interview recorded with the State Agency for Religious Affairs confirmed the important concerns they had before their meeting: its

²⁵ Freedom of Religion – Critics of state discriminatory and non-secular politics, EMC, 2017

²⁶ The assessment of the Strategy for the Development of Religious Policy of the State of Georgia, 2015, available at: <https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/sakartvelos-sakhelmtsifos-religiuri-politikis-ganvitarebis-strategiis-shefaseba>

²⁷ Third Opinion on Georgia adopted on 7 March 2019, FCNM, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/3rd-op-georgia-en/1680969b56>

²⁸ ECRI, Conclusions on the implementation of the recommendations in respect of Georgia, Subject to interim follow-up, Adopted on 5 December 2018, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-conclusions-on-the-implementation-of-the-recommendations-in-respe/1680934a7e>

mandate is not clear; its responsibilities and powers are vague; it does not have procedural guidelines for carrying out important activities; It has no mechanisms for transparency and accountability. Thus, it seems that the agency, which is a government agency, sees its essential mission not to protect the freedom of religion for all citizens, but to protect the financial and material interests of the Orthodox Church.²⁹

The report of an **international expert Maggie Nicholson**, on the implementation of Georgia's National Human Rights Strategy 2014-2020, states that the Agency was established in 2014 as the main body responsible for religious freedom issues, however, the agency has little confidence. The expert notes that instead of being perceived as an agency for the protection of religious freedom, it is discussed as a controlling mechanism for religious organizations, which has been repeatedly mentioned by various actors.³⁰

In our assessment, the existence of this agency from its very first years substantially hinders the dialogue needed for change in the field of religious freedom, as it has created a field of mistrust and conflict for a large number of religious organizations and human rights actors. Because the State Agency for Religious Affairs has repeatedly launched or lobbied for anti-human rights, regressive initiatives, expectations that this agency has the resources to play a positive role in the implementation of the necessary reform process are extremely low. It can be said, that resolving the issue of the existence and mandate of this agency is a direct measure of the will and readiness of the government for change.

Recommendations

Given the above, we would like to present our recommendations to the Government of Georgia, the Parliament, and other relevant state bodies:

Government of Georgia

Develop a coherent plan for religious freedom policy reform based on the recommendations of local and international actors, as well as of Religious Council at Public Defender's Office³¹ and democratic consultations organized with human rights actors.

²⁹ Georgian Constitutional Values versus Political and Financial Interests: The Constitutional Agreement's Departure from the Georgian Principle of Equality, The Oslo Coalition of Freedom of Religion and Belief, available at:

https://www.jus.uio.no/smr/english/about/programmes/oslocoalition/news/report_georgia_til_nett.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3_ZT6xuU9FbqsygRij8uGUPiwBqWRS_6_72eEwm7an5npj-dLy9FdboO8

³⁰ Implementation of the National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights of Georgia for 2014-2020, evaluation prepared by the international expert, Maggie Nicholson, October 17, 2019, is available at:

<https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/ka/home/publications/Georgia-human-rights-2019.html>

³¹ Recommendations of the Council of Religions under the Public Defender, 2020, available:

<https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2020092417162834667.pdf>

Abolish State Agency in Religious Affairs and work on the new models of communication and policy coordination between state and religious and public organizations, which will be based on the critical analysis of existing negative experiences and democratic consultations with relevant actors.

Develop and implement long-term social change work in the village of Buknari and communities with experience of or at risk of religious conflict, with the joint participation of various agencies and the use of interdisciplinary knowledge and tools.

Parliament of Georgia

Conduct special supervision on government's policy in the field of religious freedom.

In the light of the recommendations of the Council of Religions under the Public Defender, and local and international human rights actors, legislative changes should be initiated to promote a more equal environment for religious minorities.

Ministry of Education and Science

Study the causes of the alienation in Buknari school and introduce essential programs for constructing an equal, diverse and solidary environment in the school setting. At the same time, work to empower the school administration and teachers to increase their knowledge and sensitivity in democratic competencies.

Elaborate special guidelines and programs to create a multicultural and equal environment in public schools and first of all, introduce these programs in the schools of conflict-experienced communities.

Ministry of Internal Affairs

Develop and implement guidelines for the identification, prevention, and appropriate response to religious and ethnic conflicts based on the best practices of other states and human rights standards.

Further, enhance effective investigation of crimes motivated by religious hatred and internal oversight of them.

Prosecutor's Office of Georgia

Strengthen oversight of the investigation of crimes of religious intolerance and provide a fair and adequate legal response.

Chokhatauri Municipality City Hall and Sakrebulo

With the support of civil society and donor organizations, develop equality support programs in multi-religious and multi-ethnic villages; Especially to strengthen the introduction of multicultural approaches in local cultural policy;

Strengthen its staff's knowledge on freedom of religion, equality, conflict transformation, and management.

Strengthen the representation and participation of the Georgian Muslim community and other minorities in local politics and introduce special positive mechanisms to this end;

Create programs (agricultural, youth, cultural, etc.) based on cooperation and participation of communities to build trust and transform conflict between communities in Buknari.

The Public Defender of Georgia and the Council of Religions

Strengthen work directed at building equality, diversity, and solidarity in villages and towns with experience of religious/ethnic violence or at such risk by conducting effective monitoring of the human rights situation, making relevant recommendations to government agencies, building a dialogue between community leaders and sustainable educational work with different target groups (public officials, teachers, religious leaders, etc.).

Civil society and donor organizations

Strengthen interests and work in the villages and towns with experience of religious/ethnic violence or at such risk, and promote the democratic processes aimed at the peaceful, long-term transformation of the conflict.